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Bulletin No. 1 January 7, 2005

<http://www.epi.alaska.gov/>

2004-2005 Influenza Vaccine Restrictions Lifted

Vaccination Now Available for All Alaskans

Effective immediately, all restrictions on the use of influenza vaccine in Alaska are being lifted. Available vaccine may be used for any person 6 months of age or older who wishes to receive the vaccine.

BACKGROUND

Since October 5, 2004 the Alaska Section of Epidemiology twice has revised recommendations for the use of influenza vaccine.^{1, 2} These revisions were the result of fluctuations in vaccine availability after one of the two U.S. manufacturers was unable to deliver approximately half of the country's anticipated vaccine supply. The revised recommendations were designed to ensure Alaska's most vulnerable populations had first access to the limited vaccine supply.

THE ALASKA RESPONSE

The vast majority of public and private providers in Alaska responded to the vaccine shortage with professionalism and understanding. Providers restricted use of vaccine to high risk persons, shared vaccine and information with other providers both locally and throughout the state, and held special outreach clinics targeted for high risk persons. By late December it appeared that the majority of high risk persons in Alaska who wished to be vaccinated had obtained vaccine.

WAS THERE REALLY A SHORTAGE? IF SO, WHY DOES ALASKA HAVE ANY VACCINE REMAINING?

When the vaccine supply was cut in half in October, the United States did not have sufficient vaccine to reach the projected number of high risk persons. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommended that available vaccine be used only for persons at highest risk of complications from influenza. All states, including Alaska, followed these guidelines.

From October through December, CDC worked with the remaining vaccine manufacturer (Aventis) to redistribute available vaccine, prioritizing delivery to state health departments and providers who traditionally serve high risk clients. Alaska providers worked diligently to follow the recommendations and reserve vaccine for targeted groups. Publicity about vaccine availability for high risk persons was increased. By early December, fewer of these individuals were requesting vaccination, and Alaska expanded the vaccine eligibility to persons ≥ 50 years of age and caretakers of high risk persons. Even so, the demand continued to dwindle. Alaska also shared vaccine with North Carolina, a state with inadequate vaccine for reaching its high risk populations.

In December CDC reported that nationally approximately 63% of persons aged ≥ 65 and 46% of chronically ill adults received an influenza vaccination in October or November. The article states, "However, **more than half of adults at high risk did not try to get the influenza vaccine.** (*emphasis added*) For many of these respondents, this was because of perceived shortages..."³

Just as occurred nationally, it appears many high risk Alaskans self-deferred from vaccination, and demand has dropped considerably over the last few weeks. Therefore, several thousand doses of vaccine remain available in Alaska. Currently most states appear to have adequate vaccine supplies to reach their high risk populations, so there is no need to share vaccine with another state.

NEW RECOMMENDATIONS

The Department of Health and Social Services is lifting all restrictions on the use of influenza vaccine available within the state. This includes vaccine currently located in provider offices, as well as approximately 4,500 doses available at the Alaska Immunization Program Vaccine Depot.

The CDC has not expanded national recommendations to allow vaccination of all persons, and it appears unlikely this will occur during this influenza season. However, Alaska and several other states have expanded vaccine recommendations to include the general population. This will allow remaining vaccine to be used to provide protection against influenza for as many people as possible.

DISEASE SURVEILLANCE

Currently influenza disease is sporadic in Alaska. Reported disease information is updated weekly online at the Section of Epidemiology website:

<http://www.epi.alaska.gov/id/influenza/fluinfo.htm>

In addition, national influenza information may be found at the CDC website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/flu>

QUESTIONS

To order additional vaccine or inquire about the availability of local supplies, providers may contact the Alaska Vaccine Depot at (907) 341-2202.

For medical/technical questions about vaccine use, call the Alaska Immunization Program at (907) 269-8000.

¹ Revised Influenza Vaccination Recommendations for Alaska – 2004-05 Influenza Season. *Bulletin* No. 20, October 7, 2004.

² 2004-2005 Influenza Vaccine Recommendations Broadened. *Bulletin* No. 28, December 8, 2004.

³ Experiences with Obtaining Influenza Vaccination Among Persons in Priority Groups During a Vaccine Shortage – United States, October-November, 2004. *MMWR* 2004; 53 (49): 1153-1155.